

THE POWER OF SAYING:
'I CAN'T DO IT'.

A COUNTER-NARRATIVE TO
IDEALIZED MOTHERHOOD ON
ITALIAN SOCIAL MEDIA

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MOTHERHOOD AND FEMINISMS

Motherhood has represented a central and controversial issue in the history of feminist thought.

On one hand, it has been seen as a **symbol of oppression**, tied to the sexual division of labor and the naturalization of gender roles (Beauvoir 1949; Firestone 1970; Rich 1976).

In the 1980s and 1990s, it was rediscovered as a **source of power, a creative experience, and a politics of the body** (Irigay 1974; Braidotti 1996).

In recent years, **intersectional and queer feminism** has expanded the horizon by addressing:

- The **right to be or not to be a mother** (Ahmed 2017)
- The **neoliberal commodification** of maternity and the challenges of **work-life balance** (Fraser 2013)



MOTHERHOOD IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA TODAY

Several contemporary media phenomena exemplify tensions within current discourses on femininity. Among these are the so-called **mom influencers**, the **tradwives**, and the **Stay-at-Home Girlfriends** (Tirocchi and Taddeo, 2024).

These last figures propose a return to domestic life, often presented as desirable and aesthetically curated, with minimal reference to the maternal role.

The representation of women as caregivers—yet outside the motherhood framework—raises questions about which aspects of femininity are valorized in digital environments, and which are omitted or avoided



CASE STUDY: @MAMMADIMERDA

Founded in 2016 by Sarah Malnerich and Francesca Fiorentini, @mammadimerda is a cultural project structured across multiple media platforms. Its declared objective is to challenge dominant representations of motherhood through a multimodal communication strategy that includes Instagram, YouTube, books, live shows, and merchandising.

The project engages with both discursive strategies and commercial practices, combining elements of irony, self-representation, and activism. The Instagram account serves as a central hub from which more specialized content is disseminated on other platforms.



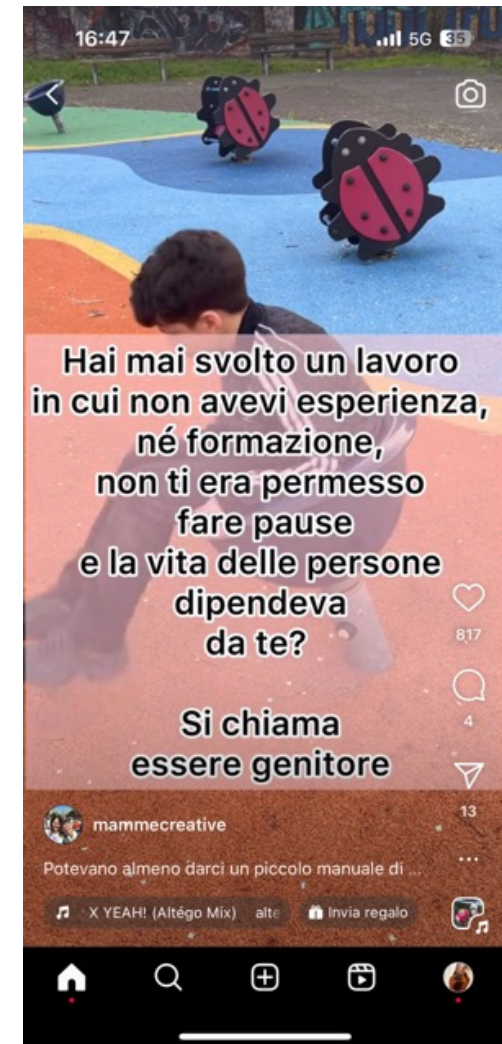
@MAMMADIMERDA: CASE STUDY

The Instagram profile currently has 1407 post and 221,000 followers

The work on this case study is exploratory in nature and involved daily consultation of the Instagram profile @mammadimerda for the period May-September 2024, saving materials (stories, posts, reels),

The content was then categorised according to certain interpretative guidelines linked to the initial theoretical hypotheses:

- «slacktivism»/ «real» action
- commercial exploitation/independence from economic factors;
- simplification of content/verticalisation
- emotionality/information



TRANSMEDIA ACTIVISM

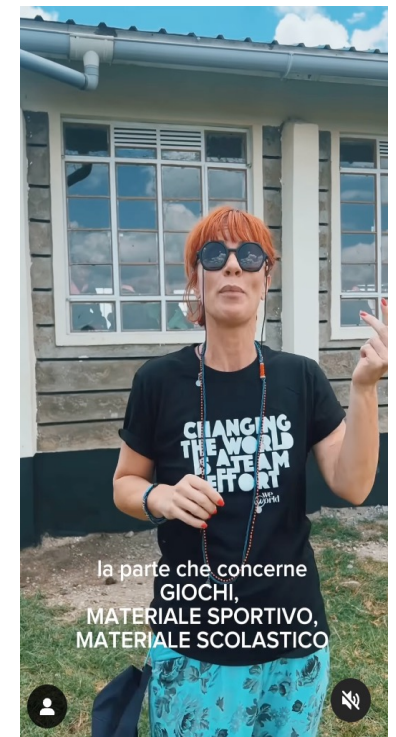
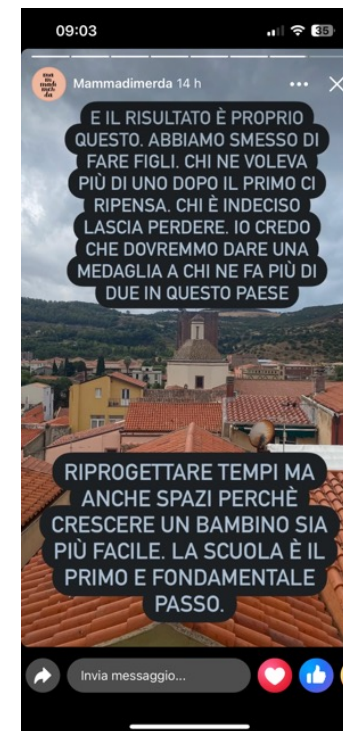


Their activities range from publishing projects to edutainment, from theatre performances to talks, parties and finally a shop, “to spread the word”. They call it “Merdaising”

SLACKTIVISM/ ACKTIVISM

An analysis of the materials reveals a skilful and well-constructed mix of elements linked to entertainment, leisure and irony, alongside elements that refer to tangible actions such as petitions on school hours and parental leave.

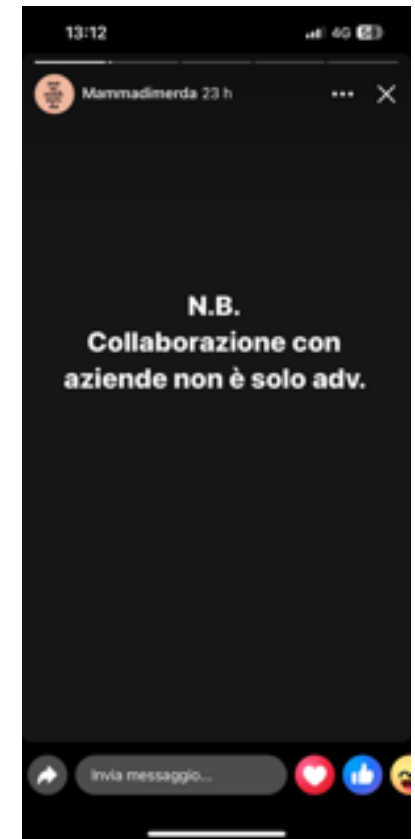
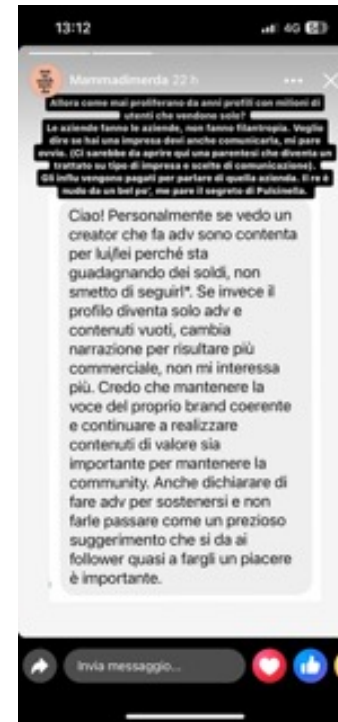
The mix of these two factors (lightness and irony vs commitment) has already been identified in other studies (Taddeo 2023, 2024) as a central element in influencers' communication strategies.



COMMERCIAL EXPLOITATION/INDIPENDENCE

With the growth of their profile and popularity, the two creators have launched an increasingly complex strategy of operations that connect aspects of mobilisation and dissemination with those aimed at economic sustainability.

Their project is based on various economic sources: support for ads is often the most critical area for creators to manage with their followers.



EMOTIONALITY/INFORMATION

The emotional mechanism that has allowed them to surf on a thorny and potentially divisive topic such as the role of mothers in our society for years is irony.

@mamma di merda often receives indignant comments, but through careful use of tone of voice, ironic and politely irreverent, it manages to defuse toxic dynamics, dissolving them in the indulgence of cathartic relief.



HASHTAG ACTIVISM

Through targeted campaigns outlined by specific hashtags such as #nonfarcela (don't do it), they collect a narrative that rejects the neoliberal diktat of “everything and everything”.

Interaction is used as a device for aggregation and biographical accumulation (Gerbaudo 2022), which allows not only the transmission but also the collection of women's representations.

DOPPIETTA GENIALE



chiara83g 3g · ❤️ aggiunto dall'autore

Ho rimandato di proposito la visita sportiva di uno dei miei figli per evitare una gara il primo di Maggio 🙄



695

Rispondi Nascondi

— Visualizza altre 11 risposte



mickymic9 3g

Le giostre a pagamento nel parco sotto casa funzionano solo con i soldi dei nonni. I nostri soldi non li prendono.



112

Rispondi Nascondi

— Visualizza altre 3 risposte

CONCLUSIONS: MOTHERHOOD IS STILL A DIVISIVE ISSUE

The social arena shows how motherhood is still an extremely complex space for discourse, between neo-mythologisation and demands for equality in the workplace. Social media is used in different ways: in idealised representations, it is a glossy showcase. In the context of feminist demands, it is a multi-platform environment for activism.



CONCLUSIONS: NON-MAINSTREAM GENDER REPRESENTATIONS REQUIRE AN “OFF-PLATFORM” MEDIA MIX

Creators who focus on cultural themes tend to reduce, if not exclude, advertising-based remuneration, as well as remuneration linked to platforms, in favour of forms of remuneration that link online activity with the traditional cultural world and industry: books, events and theatre performances are therefore a direct result of their social media popularity, but also a tool for maintaining a certain integrity with respect to the attention economy imposed by platforms (Taddeo and Diaferia 2024).



THANKS

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